

Strategic Plan

2018–2028



LA TROBE
UNIVERSITY



Olga Tennison
Autism Research Centre

Introduction

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) at La Trobe University was established in 2008 and is the first centre dedicated to autism research in Australia.

Autism is a different way of thinking and being. When autistic minds are encouraged anything is possible. When autistic minds are not encouraged, supported, and nurtured, it comes at a cost to the community, families, and individuals themselves.

We know from history and looking forward that people with autism have a lot to offer and without their contribution, opportunities for progress are missed. The key to promoting positive outcomes for all autistic people is early detection, diagnosis and the provision of supports which can dramatically improve their quality of life.

At the centre we believe that everyone living with autism should thrive and that research, innovation and knowledge translation plays a vital role in achieving this aim. Our work is informed by those with the lived experience of autism, community and industry partners, including the scientific community, and our team. We work closely with these key stakeholders in undertaking our research, and communicate our findings locally, nationally and internationally.

This plan aims to position the centre as an exemplar of autism research, innovation and stakeholder engagement, serving to shape policy and practice with a focus on improving lives of autistic people and their families across the lifespan.

We encourage lively discussion and critical debate, and are open to challenges and change in an effort to nurture an organisational culture that is ambitious, creative, collaborative, respectful and one that rewards excellence.

Scope

At the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre we work with autistic people and their families to produce high quality, relevant research.

Our research aims to:

- » facilitate positive developmental outcomes in the lives of autistic people, from infancy through to early childhood and beyond
- » have autistic people realise their full potential, enable participation in the community, enjoy life and actively and meaningfully contribute, throughout their life course
- » support families as their young autistic children grow and develop.

We use both identity-first language (autistic adults) and person-first language (e.g., children with autism) and to represent the diversity of terminology preferences within the autism community.





OTARC mission



OTARC vision

Our vision is for a world where people living with autism thrive.



Through high quality scientific research, innovation and translation we will expand knowledge to enrich the lives of autistic people and their families

Connected

Actively connecting high quality science with the communities we serve



Innovative

Creating a path for science to positively impact the lives of autistic people and their families



Our cultural qualities

Being honest, ethical and considered, and honouring the valuable gift of personal information from participants

Accountable



Generosity of spirit drives our actions and interactions

Care



Expertise

Our researchers have expertise in:

laboratory and community-based research

developmental and behavioural science

clinical and social research

Specific topics we research include:

early identification and diagnosis

early intervention

gender differences

behavioural phenotypes

parent-child interaction

family relationships

social-emotional and social-cognitive development

language development and language disorders

physical growth

mental health and wellbeing

anxiety, depression and suicidality

sleep difficulties

employment outcomes

workplace assessments

Research facilities

The Victorian Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre is located in the Margot Prior Wing of the La Trobe University Community Children's Centre, and was established in partnership with the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre to undertake joint research and knowledge translation. This exceptional facility, now known as the Margot Prior Autism Intervention Centre, caters for young autistic children who receive early intervention and care within both specialized and inclusive settings each day.

As a centre within a world class university our research is supported by the excellent La Trobe University infrastructure and services.

The centre has a:

dedicated purpose-built research laboratory with a suite of testing rooms

digital audio and video-recording facilities

eye-tracking and physiological recording equipment

office space to house research personnel for data entry and behavioural coding

well developed data assets that inform its work



OTARC goals

At OTARC we instigate positive change for autistic people by:



Leading research that enables early identification, diagnosis and intervention



Developing and evaluating innovative approaches that enrich the lives of autistic people



Generously engaging with stakeholders in research development, knowledge transfer and successful implementation of research findings



Training the next generation outstanding autism scholars and clinicians



Achieving research and operational excellence

OTARC goals and objectives



GOAL 1:

Leading research that enables early identification, diagnosis and intervention

- » Develop evidence-based approaches to identify autism early and to enhance learning and development
- » Re-establish the early assessment clinic and work to improve diagnostic approaches that are sensitive to the needs of families with young children
- » Research pathways to services that recognise the critical needs of families of newly diagnosed children and evaluate existing services to test their impact and efficacy
- » Work to empower families in the support of their autistic children
- » Work in partnership with the Margot Prior Autism Intervention Centre.



GOAL 2:

Developing and evaluating innovative approaches that enrich the lives of autistic people

- » Engage with autistic people and their families as well as industry and community organisations to design and execute impactful research across the lifespan
- » Undertake research designed to facilitate successful transition to education and employment for autistic people
- » Understand the conditions that commonly accompany autism and their impact through life
- » Understand the social and economic impact of our research and knowledge translation
- » Actively engage with other disciplines and research centres within and outside La Trobe to broaden scientific capacity.



Work to empower families in the support of their autistic children

Instigate positive change for autistic people through their active involvement in research

Engage with autistic people and their families as well as industry and community organisations to design and execute impactful research across the lifespan



GOAL 3:

Generously engaging with stakeholders in research development, knowledge transfer and successful implementation of research findings

- » Instigate positive change for autistic people through their active involvement in research
- » Work with key partners to facilitate research translation, and implementation of evidence-based practices into the community
- » Engage in multi-disciplinary collaborations with other researchers, research centres, industry and community partners
- » Develop strong relationships with regional communities where La Trobe University campuses are located
- » Lead and participate in state, national and international research networks
- » Consolidate and grow relationships with professional communities and government agencies
- » Continue to provide leadership in strategically important national autism initiatives
- » Use all forms of media to promote the work of the centre and increase the ownership of the centres findings by the community
- » Actively engage with benefactors and their families to demonstrate the outcomes of their generosity.



Research pathways to services that recognise the critical needs of families of newly diagnosed children and evaluate existing services to test their impact and efficacy

OTARC goals and objectives



GOAL 4:

Training the next generation of outstanding autism scientists

- » Select and support high-quality early career researchers and research students to build autism research capacity
- » Provide opportunities for broadening and development of knowledge through engagement with other disciplines via seminars and conferences, hosting research scholars, as well as supporting attendance at workshops/master classes
- » Develop a research culture that values rigour and debate
- » Actively develop pathways for autistic people to study at La Trobe University
- » Develop an undergraduate and honours pathways for autistic people through scholarships and designated positions
- » Continue teaching of an undergraduate subject on autism.



GOAL 5:

Achieving research and operational excellence

- » Increase leadership capacity through strategic appointments of leading local and international researchers
- » Strategically align research to increase and diversify funding opportunities available through competitive grants, industry and government agencies, donations and bequests
- » Disseminate research findings in high-impact journals and books, at national and international conferences, and community initiated events
- » Work in partnership with the Margot Prior Autism Intervention Centre to establish a business case for its long term success
- » Implement management systems to ensure the centre operates efficiently and effectively
- » Develop a culture that values governance and establish an internal management structure to facilitate accountability
- » Engage with strategic university initiatives including investigating the feasibility of a dedicated facility with a suitable environment on La Trobe University's Melbourne campus at Bundoora suited to our research participants, clients and researchers
- » Train all staff in the commercialisation of intellectual property and actively work with the university to record and commercialise Intellectual Property
- » Develop a staff Training and Development plan which includes the Margot Prior Autism Intervention Centre staff.

Actively develop pathways for autistic people to study at La Trobe University

Strategically align research to increase and diversify funding opportunities available through competitive grants, industry and government agencies, donations and bequests



The establishment of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre was made possible by the private donations of Mrs Olga Tennison.

Her generous contribution to the advancement of research into autism was matched by funding from La Trobe University.

The Centre, named in acknowledgement of Mrs Tennison's generosity, will ensure more children with autism are identified and diagnosed earlier – with considerably improved long-term outcomes.



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